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Chapter 9: True Ornament? The Art and Industry of Electric Lighting in the Home, 1889-1902

Graeme Gooday and Abigail Harrison-Moore

During the great part of the last century, Art had but little in common with the crafts of the workers in metal and it was reserved for the declining years of the Victorian era to bear witness to that great revival of interest in the applied arts, which we see as a living force to-day. In no direction has this been more marked than in that branch of handicraft which concerns itself with the design and manufacture of metal fittings for electric lighting purposes.¹

At the turn of the twentieth century the arrival of domestic electric lighting posed major new challenges: safety, economy, reliability and aesthetics.² For many householders, as much as for those working in the decorative arts, the last of these was a major concern. This quotation from an Art Journal editorial of October 1904 signals one way in which the tension between art and industry at the centre of this chapter would be resolved³. As demonstrated by two of William Morris's key disciples, Philip Webb and W. A. S. Benson, this would be accomplished by looking back to the medieval 'golden age' of metal craft, when crafts were as valued as 'art', and concurrently promoting a skilled craft-based approach to engage with the fresh possibilities of electric lighting.³ Their anxiety that the ancient metal crafts should be reunited with this newest of technologies illustrates the significance of the aesthetics of electric lighting in exploring the relationship between art and industry.

As the Art Journal saw it, the artist-craftsman's application of 'metal forms' to the needs of the electric lighting engineer revealed an important and fascinating new relationship developing between 'one of the youngest of the sciences and the very oldest of the industrial arts.' This topic had previously been neglected by artists, it alleged: throughout the preceding century, the design of the lamps and gas fittings 'which held sway' had received little attention from them. They were instead left to the 'tender mercies' of the trade designer and the commercial makers, whose use of stereotyped patterns and diverse utilitarian metal articles had produced 'sadly inartistic' results. The Art Journal found this separation of artists from industry surprising, given the 'high order of excellence' attained in metalworking during preceding generations.⁴ A revival of the collaborative sort underway was thus sorely needed to guarantee the integrity of the glamorous new technology.

Rather than acquiescing to the Art Journal's partisan view on the proper development of electric lighting, however, we examine the alternative approaches that it condemned as producing 'sadly inartistic' results. This attack had, we suggest, one particular (implicit) female target, Mrs J. E. H. (Alice) Gordon, whose popular handbook, *Decorative Electricity* appeared in 1891, running to a cheaper second edition in 1892. Her amateur use of silk dressings for lampshades to disguise electric light, and recommendations for exotic designs to assimilate the shaded lamps into the late Victorian boudoir, were the antithesis of the Arts and Crafts movement's focus on foregrounding the art of metalwork. In the second half of the paper, we illustrate Benson's and Webb's approaches to this topic by examining how they extended Arts and Crafts techniques to the electric lighting at Standen, a country house outside East Grinstead, West Sussex. By comparing the commentary in Mrs Gordon's book to the bold statements in both the Art Journal and the designs of Webb and Benson, we show that, although the end results in terms of physical design could not have been more different,

Gordon's rhetoric on 'good design' in electric lighting was very similar to that of her critics. However, from the *Art Journal's* complete avoidance of any direct mention of her work we infer that its editors would not encourage their readers to think that their discussion of the art-industry nexus had anything in common with the practise of 'false ornament' that they decried in works such as hers. Hence it is to her book *Decorative Electricity* that we must first turn to analyse the early development of contested notions of 'artistic' design for electric lighting.

Transformers: the changing aesthetics of electric lighting in the home (1892-98)

It would be very difficult to over-rate the fascination of the art of electric lighting in its application to beautiful rooms, as exemplified in Mrs J. E. H. Gordon's charming little volume on 'Decorative Electricity'.⁵

What constituted 'artistic' electric lighting in the last decade of the nineteenth century was clearly a somewhat contested matter. The *Art Journal*, a forum for debate among predominantly male designers and art critics, presumed the status of arbiter of good taste on such matters. By the late nineteenth century, the majority of articles that surrounded those explicitly directed towards electric lighting seemed to promote decorative arts and crafts from the past. This marked a step away from the *Art Journal's* championing of the unity of arts and industrial design in the 1840s and 50s. As George P. Landow has pointed out, the retirement of Samuel Carter Hall as editor in 1880 saw the journal turn away from its previously anti-Ruskinian rhetoric⁶, which may go some way to explain why so much ink was spilled on electric lighting on its pages in the 1890s⁷. The results, however, that it condemned condescendingly as 'sadly inartistic' were promoted by commercial manufacturers and

female authorities, and celebrated in the popular press as being distinctly ‘decorative’. Indeed as we see from the comment in the *Lady’s Pictorial* above, for at least one significant reader, the use of commercial fabrics and ornaments to bring decorative electric lighting to the home resulted in much beauty.

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As Gooday has argued in *Domesticating Electricity*, there was much objection particularly among female commentators to the garishly dazzling effect of the first mass produced electric light fittings available in the later 1880s. Given the enormous expense of early electric lighting in comparison to that of gas lighting, practical forms of the new illuminant had been designed by electrical companies on the grounds of industrial efficiency to give value for money. They thus were unshielded, directed downward and otherwise constructed to have maximum brilliance, features that were much cherished by male observers as they contemplated paying the bill, wishing both to enjoy the vivid spectacle of the electric light and also its virtuous non-emission of the sulphuric vapours that gas lamps emitted, so often to the detriment of furnishings and artworks. As seen through the characteristically male gaze of *Punch* magazine in 1889, the discomfort of women experiencing such harsh rays prompted them to seek protection in the form of Japanese sunshades which allegedly made the ladies more ‘decorative’ still:

It was precisely this strategy of disguising, deflecting or absorbing the electric light by the judicious use of silk covering material that Mrs Gordon advised to readers of her popular handbook. As the collaborative spouse of an electrical engineer, she had a strong interest in adapting the new technology to ‘feminine’ values and sensibilities, and as a married house-manager, she wrote as an authority on the matter for other women to follow. Her criticism of garish lighting was trenchant in this work, and argued for a particular kind of fabric and

ornament-centred strategy to accomplish the artistry ineptly omitted by some manufacturers and designers (including some that advertised in her own book)

For Mrs Gordon and those working in her tradition of amateur home decoration, the strategy adopted for the beautifying domestication of electric light was a matter of recasting the new illuminants in terms of the familiar. This was accomplished by disguising, hiding, diverting less attractive features, while also using historical design references from the eighteenth century and earlier to lend classical and oriental panache to both the details of ornamentation and the practice of marketing. Commercial designers were very happy to play along with this particular vision. We see this, for example, in the case of one prominent maker advertising in the opening pages of Mrs Gordon's book: the Faraday Company's use of the classically clad female torch-bearer was clearly to signal that electric light was a medium of truthful illumination, bringing trustworthiness and even justice to beams of light that (potentially) brought global illumination. Mrs Gordon similarly appealed to a selective past in her promotional work to find new ways to beautify electric light fittings, but a past of fabrics and adornment with non-European ornamentations, not of metalwork.

These engagements with the past enabled both sides in the debate about artistic lighting to accuse the other of regressive design. Mrs Gordon accused 'artists' of using too much medievalism – old forms obtruding on the function of lighting, and the Art Journal writers accused her ilk of being too sentimental in ornamentation. The question then was: how to unite the art of electric lighting with its industrial production? Each side effectively accused the other of being incompetent in this and seemingly to allow art and industry to work in opposition.

Far from being an uncritical consumer, Mrs Gordon was scathing about much of the commercial electric lighting that was available (even though this was advertised in the front- and back- matter of her book). For example, she was very critical of the ineptitude of many domestic installations that allowed the harshness of unshaded light to intrude on domestic conversation. When considering the Drawing Room she reported: 'Much of the electric light we see at present in drawing rooms is not conducive to comfort and repose and hinders instead of aids conversation by its unsympathetic glare'.⁸ Her judgement was that, among the broad range of possible electric light fittings available commercially, only a limited range of metal brackets, finishes and design characteristics could meet the criterion of being 'artistic', and indeed only if muted by suitable silk shades or reflected off walls or furnishings.

Dedicating most chapters to different parts of the house, she identified other particularly troublesome domains that needed the female householder to be creative with her decorative resources and within her (presumptively) limited budget. Here she identifies one of her shared themes with the designers who responded so positively to John Ruskin's theories of art, such as Morris and Webb: that metalwork should be used with maximized forms of its own innate aesthetic. Staircases were a particular problem area for her: here householders should avoid both 'modern bright brass-work' and modern versions of French 'old lamps,' with their 'glaring machine-made brass-work' and round dabs of 'common coloured glass'. By contrast she saw the colour of copper as 'delightful', lending itself well to staircase decoration, but so little such lighting equipment available for staircases was suitably graceful that she felt a simple string and pendant was the only option for the 'slender purse'.⁹ The Boudoir was another domain in which she argued that feminine dexterity and good taste was required against the inelegant results of contemporary commercial production methods. She commented instead that the hand-making of electric light shades was an industry 'very

suitable for ladies to take up and develop', especially as these would always be 'more successful and more artistic made one by one', with ladies' personal care and attention devoted to each' than anything which could be made by the 'best workman' in a factory.

Here we see, ironically perhaps, that Mrs Gordon clearly shared one point in common with the Arts and Crafts movement. This was William Morris's view of the integrity of work done by the skilled craftsmen, as opposed to the mass manufactured inartistic mechanical replica – albeit in Mrs Gordon's case more by the female hand than that of the male artisan. We must therefore emphasise at least this instance of commonality with the partisans of the Art Journal. Yet as a criticism of those who worked in the domain of the Art Journal, she in turn noted that artists had 'not kept pace with the engineers', criticizing most pendants and electroliers (electrical chandeliers) as being 'singularly wanting in imagination and grace: 'They are too heavy and clumsy for the light lamps they support; the lines and curves are ungraceful, and the lamps are often so placed that they shed their light directly in our eyes, instead of reflecting it from the objects that should be illuminated by them.'¹⁰ Following Benson et al. she argued that these artist designers were 'too much the slaves of precedent', derived from their experience of gas, candles, oil, and 'other relics of the Middle Ages'. They had carelessly forgotten that the holders for all these lights followed the requirement to have a 'clear space above them for the escape of hot and foul air' and to be reachable by taper or match. Only when they had realised fully their freedom from these two historical 'limitations' would designers begin to appreciate properly the 'artistic possibilities of the new illuminants and give us original design of flying figures, birds, and carved Cupids, delicate chain work, faintly tinted glass, and china powdered with flowers'.¹¹

Artistic Criticism of Mrs Gordon

Flying figures and carved Cupids were in turn, however, just the kinds of ornamentation rejected by the earnest Ruskinian Art Journal commentators as untrue to the media of modern illumination. Their emphasis was on truth to material: in both classical writings and medieval sources, the authentic use of material for particular purposes, with un-contrived beautification was what was sought. Indeed writing in the Art Journal in 1892 at the time of the publication of the second edition of *Decorative Electricity*, it was on such particularities of design that Aymer Valance effectively criticised Mrs Gordon:

What sober-minded person could command extravagant and pretentious devices such as monkey-brackets representing the dawn of the intellect; owl-lamps, representing wisdom derived from light; or Atlases, angels of light, vestals, cupids, tritons etc. all emblematical of some idea or other connected with illumination? Of course the British Philistine, with whom sentiment is everything and intrinsic quality counts for little whose instinct is for having a tale tacked on to everything, says 'how interesting! How charming they are, to be sure!¹²

But, Valance reminded his readers, the function of lamps was only the 'humble' one of giving useful light, not preaching sermons: common-sense folk did not want 'philosophical or other truths, however sublime' enforced with the use of electricity. Unlike Mrs Gordon he argued that the only way to insure the general adoption of the electric light was to 'commend itself to the public on its own merits on the score of practical utility'. That meant electric lighting equipment needed to be designed with intrinsic artistry, needing no additional ornament or veil to maximise its beauty.¹³

By contrast for Mrs Gordon, writing as a domestic authority, the overall context of lighting was key for her, not the intrinsic quality of the lighting design: each pendant, bracket and shade should only be chosen ‘after seeing the light behind it’, taking into account how different was the effect of electric light from other illuminants ‘in its effects upon colours’ and similarly with the different shades of colour ‘that the same glass and silk will show with transmitted or reflective light respectively’. As judged by the Art Journal the presumptively female designer of household electrical fittings was more concerned with matters of juxtaposition than the ‘novel and artistic’ designers which worked for the lighting manufacturers Faraday and Son of London, This company’s designs for electroliers were illustrated frequently in the Journal’s pages, and celebrated for their ‘excellence in design’, although they were criticised for not following an arts and crafts doctrine of simplicity and truth to materials.¹⁴

And in a further contrast, the artistic commentators on electric lighting were not as committed as Mrs Gordon was (for reasons of harmonious spousal collaboration) to sole use of the newer illuminant. As Valance discussed in his series on ‘The Furnishing and Decoration of the House’ in December 1892: ‘Of the older methods, gas may be tolerated on the score of convenience in offices, passages etc. but it should generally be avoided in living rooms, on account of the injurious effects upon the air we breathe’.¹⁵

However, Valance did at least agree with Mrs Gordon, that, where electric light was to be installed, all previous gas fittings should be removed: ‘The problem is not so much how to decorate the incandescent light itself, nor how to mitigate its excessive brilliancy, but rather how to deal with the connecting wire ... the truth is the requirements of electric lights are quite different, so that the old gas fittings will not serve’. And when the new technology of

the Welsbach incandescent mantle was also introduced in 1892, as the gas industry's alternative to the safety of incandescent electric lighting, there were far fewer decorative possibilities. So naturally the artists joined Mrs Gordon and others in a move towards a prospectively greater level of professional success in the adoption of electric lighting.¹⁶

Mrs Gordon's suggested deployment of domestic accessorization to assimilate electric lighting into the home, chimes interestingly {check!} with the rapidly changing understanding of the art-industry relation from 1892-98 which furnished the first modernist designs for electric lighting. This involved Arts and Crafts architects and designers, often those associated with Morris and Co., who, having embraced the inevitably wider adoption of electric lighting, worked to develop a new aesthetic. W. A. S. Benson is an acknowledged leader in this field, celebrated for his variety of lighting designs that embraced the technological possibilities and celebrated them in metalwork. Less well known, but equally influential was Philip Webb. Their designs can be seen together at Standen, and it is to this house we will now turn to explore their response to the art versus industry dialectic, and to compare their design credos to that of Mrs Gordon.

From Webb to Benson: designing for electric lighting at Standen

The growing adaptation of electricity to light private residences has created a demand for elegant fittings which shall worthily compare with other decorations of a room.¹⁷

Late in the year (1892) that the second edition of Mrs Gordon's book appeared, Valance already saw an alternative transformation taking place in domestic illumination. In the Art Journal he represented this as a move away from 'extravagant and pretentious devices' that

seemed to ignore the technologies of electric lighting – quite obviously a barbed comment on the excesses of Mrs Gordon’s style.¹⁸ These excesses were later described in the *Art Journal* (1904) as being replaced by ‘fittings which combine all practical essentials with dignity or grace of form, not sacrificing true ornament to utility, nor utility to mere extravagance or profusion of ornament’.¹⁹ Such a transformation can be mapped through an exploration of the work of Webb and Benson at Standen. In a previous collaborative work we have looked at the project to build electric lighting into this house.²⁰ In this second article, we want to explore the designs for the lighting fixtures in more detail and test them against the Ruskinian call for ‘honesty’ in design. Ruskin’s dictum that we ‘should ornament construction, and not construct ornament’ is particularly applicable to such objects..²¹

Standen was designed by Philip Webb in 1891, for James Beale (1840-1910), a wealthy solicitor whose London residence was at 32 Holland Park. From the start of the commission electricity was planned into the house in line with Beale’s reputation as a ‘progressive’, at a time when the majority of the population were still in the process of giving up their paraffin oil lamps and candles in favour of gas lighting.²² Webb’s account to James S Beale of Hollybush Farm near East Grinstead Sussex shows that from 1893 onwards he and Mr and Mrs Beale were meeting to discuss electrifying their weekend retreat..²³

On 30 November 1894, Webb ‘Paid John Pearson [7s and 9d (and copper drawing room fender 8s)] for 7 embossed copperplates for electric lights in drawing room’. His designs for the drawing room lights have been considered in our previous article but it is useful to remind ourselves here of the Arts and Crafts aesthetic that Webb employed, where the sunflower designs mapped against the Morris and Co. wallpaper in the drawing room, and celebrated the craftsmanship of Pearson’s copperwork, a senior metal worker in Robert Ashbee’s Guild

of Handicraft. Webb and Pearson together aimed to produce a design for this newest of technology that celebrated the potential of the metal and glass employed, and the skill of the craftsman. Ashbee had published one of the first full articles in *Art Journal* to make 'Suggestions for Electric Light Fittings'. Aimed at the artist and designer, he suggested hammered copper, celebrating the 'extreme simplicity' of designs where 'the bright surface of the copper serv[es] as a reflector, and at the same time as a support' and he published a design that very closely resembles Webb's drawing room lights at Standen.²⁴

The celebration of the properties of copper for electric lighting schemes (also shared with Mrs Gordon) leads us to the work of the other designer chosen by the Beales, W. A. S. Benson. His involvement was commissioned by means significantly different to Webb's entry to the project, and this reflects Benson's wider commercial activities as the director of W. A. S. Benson and Co. Benson's lights were used throughout the house.²⁵ Whereas Webb was specifically commissioned by the Beales to design electric light fittings, in common with many manufacturers including those advertising in Mrs Gordon's book, Benson's fittings were largely constructed from patterns held in stock that could be variously assembled to create the vast range of fittings from which the consumer could choose to buy.²⁶

This move away from bespoke designs in itself maps against a wider change in consumer behaviour in the late nineteenth century, when England witnessed a significant growth in the high street and the department store. As Thorstein Veblen theorised in 1899, our period of study was structured by consumerism, financial speculation and the rise of Veblen's 'leisure class'.²⁷ Because at this time consumption was seen as both important yet frivolous, commentators frequently located it in the domestic sphere where women were expected to consume to express the status of the family, and Mrs Beale was no exception to this.²⁸

Benson's company benefitted from this rise in consumption and between 1884 and 1887, 'demand and production steadily increased, while the variety of patterns [for lights] designed and carried out came to be reckoned not by the dozens but by the hundreds'.²⁹ As Maureen Dillon has confirmed, Benson was one of the few manufacturers to produce fittings for all lighting technologies and he designed component parts to be used within and across these technologies.³⁰

Dillon has produced a very detailed and carefully researched survey of the lighting at Standen for the National Trust, and in this she has confirmed that Benson wares were employed in the Morning Room Corridor, the Hall, and the Larkspur Dressing Room. The Morning Room Corridor, for example, was lit by three Benson wrought iron lanterns with opalescent glass liners that are the same design as those in the Hall and elsewhere in the house. Interestingly the shades were made by James Powell, who also made the Vaseline glassware for Webb's lights in the Drawing Room, demonstrating the significant interaction between Arts and Crafts designers and manufacturers at the time. Such opalescent glassware also features in the six wrought iron lanterns purchased from Benson for the Hall, which appeared as design no. 5515 in his *Catalogue of Electric Lighting Designs 1899-1900*.³¹ For the bedrooms, Mrs Beale purchased some of Benson's most popular designs, his dual purpose wall/table lamp. These lamps were directionally adjustable, making the most of the technological potential of electric light to be re-positioned according to need, in direct contrast to gas light.³² Here again we can see an interesting analogy between Benson making the most of the freedoms afforded by electric lighting and Mrs Gordon's demand that designers not be 'slaves of precedent', although, of course, her aesthetic response to this was very different.³³

Benson, Art and Electricity

The first light fittings produced by Benson et al in the mid-1880s were, in comparison to the fittings produced by other manufacturers, virtually devoid of ornament; Dillon has thus argued that Benson was the first designers of light fittings to break away from historical precedent in regard to decoration.³⁴ Contemporaries celebrated his work for its truth to function and materials, in line with an Arts and Crafts aesthetic: ‘Many of his fittings have no ornament ... but depend for effect on sheer beauty of line or mass, combined with the charm due to correct mechanical construction. For Mr. Benson is as good an engineer as he is an artist and designs his fittings, whether rich or simple, with a direct view to their purpose and lasting properties.’³⁵

In 1899, Benson commented in a Ruskinian manner that, ‘If you would have true ornament you must resolutely refuse all ornament, and just now in this particular branch of work, false ornament is plentiful enough while the real thing for everyday purposes practically non-existent’.³⁶ In the same year, he reflected on the influence of William Morris on this design turn, concluding that, ‘he found the arts of decoration practically dead in England’, and as a result produced the ‘one vital style of modern days, recognised through Europe as the only school of design which was not an empty echo of passed systems’.³⁷ It was in this desire to learn from the past but to produce a thoroughly modern style to reflect the newest of technologies, that has led many commentators to describe Benson as an innovator of the most significant type, and in 1895, *The Studio* even dared to suggest that he had surpassed his master, ‘Mr Benson’s lights could be more influential on public taste than Mr. Morris’. Jope-Slade, in his article on ‘Art and Electricity’ for the *Magazine of Art* in 1897, describes Benson’s designs as ‘palpitatingly modern ... in a word they are quaint, striking, individual

... the poetry of the mathematical line, evasive of description, and exhausting the beautiful materials in variety and tone'.³⁸

At the heart of his aesthetic was the doctrine of truth to materials and technology, and Benson spoke strongly about false ornamentation, which he felt was untrue to the nature of the illuminating medium. Many descriptions of his work speak about Benson's innovatory use of combining metals to enhance the aesthetic qualities of his light fittings:

The charm of quiet contrasts of colour is added by the use of various metals and patinas. Mr Benson has practically re-introduced and extended the association of copper with brass. Brass is employed where rigidity and strength are demanded; copper is used for reflecting surfaces and for those portions of the work where its beautiful colour and peculiar mechanical properties can be utilised to best advantage.³⁹

His lamps and their shades used an aesthetic that celebrated the properties of the copper to throw electric light out into the room, and emphasised the industry inherent in the technology of electric lighting. Aymer Valance, in the *Art Journal* in 1892, commented on Benson's desire to enhance the technical possibilities of the lighting medium, whatever it may be. For example, while stating that 'Oil gives a far more agreeable light than gas' Valance complimented Benson's 'ingenious arrangement' for a pendant lamp in which 'the flame is entirely hidden with a metal basin in place of a globe, the light diffused by reflection from a shaped dish attached to the chains above the lamp'.⁴⁰

For example, Benson invented the vaned shade of his lamps at Standen, in order to ‘reflect the maximum amount of light without itself becoming overheated.’⁴¹ Likewise, every aspect of the technology of electric lighting was emphasised in the design, including the electric flex, perhaps the most obvious signifier of the technological differences between gas and electric. This Arts and Crafts desire to emphasise function can also be seen in Webb’s designs. At Standen, the Morning Room lamps, supplied by James Powell of Whitefriars glass, have electric flexes decorated with spiral glass cord ornaments that both drew attention to the novelty of electricity and also relieved the plainness of the wiring.⁴² As Dillon has reminded us, cord ornaments appeared in lighting manufacturers’ catalogues in the late nineteenth century. Both the shades and the cord ornaments drew the eye to the electric lamp and celebrated the new technological possibilities of electricity. In 1897 Benson produced a booklet *Notes on Electric Wiring and Fittings*, where he was not only selling his products but also educating the consumer in basic electrics with the aim of enabling them to light their homes safely.⁴³ The booklet was illustrated in colour with examples of his fittings, gave advice, with the aid of room plans, on where lights could be most effectively distributed in the home and the appropriate fittings to use in different rooms. Although Benson wrote this text in 1897, his views had probably been established by 1894 when electricity was installed at Standen.

The combination of an Arts and Crafts aesthetic and yet also the use of the most up-to-date machinery he could buy, has led some to view Benson as the most contradictory of designers. Shirley Bury even called her important article on Benson in *Country Life* in 1965 ‘A Craftsman who used the Machine.’⁴⁴ He could, therefore, be viewed as a designer who demonstrates most clearly the dialectic of ‘Art versus Industry’. And yet, the products that the firm sold to families such as the Beales, seemed to celebrate art and industry, bringing

together Morris's call for craftsmanship with an artistry that celebrated the potential of machine production. He designed his metalwork almost entirely for machine production and he used base metal and electro plate as his principal materials, demonstrating a particular liking for brass and copper used in combination. Bury locates the reasons for his embracing of the machine in the influence of his maternal uncle, W. A. Smith, a keen amateur metal worker, who had a workshop elaborately equipped with machinery. Benson, therefore, learned to appreciate the possibilities of the machine, unlike most members of the Arts and Crafts movement, whose dislike of mechanical production 'rarely sprang from close personal knowledge of the workings of machinery'⁴⁵. In his *Elements of Handicraft and Design* (1893), published while Standen was being built, he wrote (almost in defiance of the title) 'The mechanics of industry are not mechanical in the baser sense, but full of fine philosophy'.⁴⁶ So, for Benson to embrace mechanisation was not to abandon the fine art of design.

Despite his basic differences with his contemporaries over the means of production, Benson still found himself in agreement over several other important issues. He shared their concern for quality, his articles were beautifully made and finished and they were in no sense intended as a cheap alternative to handiwork. As such, his work exemplified the call in the *Art Journal* for design that recalled the distinguishing characteristics of 'old-world design' with an 'inimitable blending of the utilitarian and the beautiful' in the production of those everyday articles which few still felt 'worthy of time or attention in the making'.⁴⁷ In this vein *The Times* obituary of Benson in 1924 highlighted his obsession with using the latest technologies to create designs that pushed the boundaries of artistic possibilities: all of his work was described as resulting from a 'profound study

of the capabilities of heavy stamping plant, spinning lathes, and shaping tools which he was able to put down in the large Hammersmith works.' Visitors to the works were described as being 'amazed and almost aghast to find themselves in what appeared to be an engineering workshop, full of large machines, with endless rows of turning and polishing lathes'..⁴⁸

Benson's designs for electric lighting were indeed very influential beyond the United Kingdom. In 1898, the German design commentator Meier-Graefe wrote in *Dekorativ Kunst* that Benson had 'taken the first step' towards a new aesthetic for lamp design. He 'provided the initiative for modern lamps to develop and you will not find anything better from the practical point of view ... his work will count in the history of the modern lamp.'⁴⁹ And the great commentator on *Das Englische Haus*, Hermann Muthesius wrote in 1904 that

Benson was the first to solve the problem of design in metal in the more modern spirit when he created lamps that were later to have a revolutionary effect on all our metalware ... Benson was the leading spirit in electric lighting appliances in England and on the Continent he was a fruitful instigator. He developed not only the most pleasing lines and forms but also many ideas about lighting.⁵⁰

A decade after Mrs Gordon's book on ornamental decorative electricity reached the peak of its popularity, her authority had been entirely eclipsed by the men – especially Benson – that specialised in the application of Arts and Crafts doctrine to electric lighting.

Conclusions

This piece has examined the transition from early improvisations in electrical light aesthetics to the development of a new twentieth-century art form that skilfully produced a material culture for the new illuminant through the time-honoured metal craftwork practices. In the process we saw that even eminent female authors, who, like Mrs Alice Gordon, were critical of the ‘inartistic’ industry of electric lighting around them, were marginalised and eventually displaced by the Arts and Crafts designers who supported the new aesthetics of electric lighting, notwithstanding the commonality in their requirements for good design even though the aesthetic results were startlingly different. ‘Progressive’ homes such as Standen, epitomised this new approach of integrally harmonizing design with the qualities of materials used in ornamental lighting. This story then is one about gender shifts in authority, expertise and ‘true ornament’ as much as it is about the reclaiming of one form of modernity by a form of craft skill. Finally it is about how the *Art Journal* illustrates the ways in which late nineteenth-century tensions in the art-industry nexus can be mapped in the case of electric lighting. We have shown how the *Art Journal*’s particular vision of this nexus, celebrating the natural qualities of metal design, displaced others - until it in turn was replaced by the arrival of new artificial materials in the Art Deco movement of the early twentieth century.

¹ Footnotes require formatting in line with MUP’s guidelines, and we’ll also need a bibliography. Some of the footnotes seem to be repeats/or to repeat what is mentioned in the text. ‘Electric Light and the Metal Crafts’, *Art Journal*, October 1904, pp. 321-28, p.321, pp. 321-2

² Gooday *Domesticating Electricity: Technology, Uncertainty and Gender, 1880-1914* (London: Pickering and Chatto, 2008).

³ See Abigail Harrison Moore & Graeme Gooday, ‘Decorative Electricity: Standen and the Aesthetics of New Lighting Technologies in the Nineteenth Century Home’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 35:4 (2013): 363-383. In contrast to that

article's focus on Webb, this piece, our second collaboration focuses specifically on Benson, and extends our comparison of Mrs Gordon to those writing in the Art Journal.

⁴ 'Electric Light and the Metal Crafts', Art Journal, October 1904, pp. 321-28, p.321

⁵ Review in *Lady's Pictorial* cited in Mrs J.E.H. Gordon, *Decorative Electricity* 2nd edition.

⁶ George P. Landow, 'The Art Journal, 1850-1880: Antiquarianism, the Medieval Revival and the Reception of Pre-Raphaelitism', *The Pre-Raphaelite Review* 2 (1979), pp.71-76. Landow also points out that 'The Art Journal presents an interesting example of a major periodical that appears to have done much to encourage the medieval revival in spite of itself...possibly, Hall and others in charge of the periodical simply wished to give their readers what they wanted'. (p.76)

⁷ Thanks to our very able editors for suggesting this turn of phrase. The move towards celebrating the possibilities of electric lighting may also have been linked to the increasing competition in the final years of the century from other journals, particularly *The Magazine of Art*. The Art Journal eventually ceased production in 1912.

⁸ Gordon *Decorative Electricity*, p.87 (See Gooday 2008). We consider the drawing room in particular in Abigail Harrison Moore & Graeme Gooday, 'Decorative Electricity: Standen and the Aesthetics of New Lighting Technologies in the Nineteenth Century Home', *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 35:4 (2013): 363-383.

⁹ Gordon *Decorative Electricity*, pp. 40-41.

¹⁰ Gordon *Decorative Electricity*, p.87.

¹¹ Gordon *Decorative Electricity*, p.88.

¹² Aymer Valance 'The Furnishing and Decoration of the House, VI Window Blinds, Lighting and Accessories', *Art Journal*, Dec 1892, p.376.

¹³ Aymer Valance 'The Furnishing and Decoration of the House, VI Window Blinds, Lighting and Accessories', *Art Journal*, Dec 1892, p.376.

¹⁴ 'Electric Light Fittings Edinburgh Exhibition 1890' *Art Journal*, August 1890, p.231.

¹⁵ Aymer Valance 'The Furnishing and Decoration of the House, VI Window Blinds, Lighting and Accessories', *Art Journal*, Dec 1892, p.374-5

¹⁶ Benson and Co. also converted some gas lights to electric and worked across the range of lighting technologies. This is a theme that has been covered in excellent detail by Maureen Dillon in *Artificial Sunshine, A Social History of Domestic Lighting*, (London: National Trust Enterprises Ltd. 2002) and by Ian Hammerton and Peter Rose in Hammerton, Ian (ed), *W.A.S. Benson, Arts and Crafts Luminary and Pioneer of Modern Design*, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club, 2005). Our paper builds on their work on Benson by contrasting and relating his practice to that of Mrs Gordon.

¹⁷ ‘Electric Light Fittings’, *Art Journal*, Dec 1901, p.3

¹⁸ Aymer Valance ‘The Furnishing and Decoration of the House, VI Window Blinds, Lighting and Accessories’, *Art Journal*, Dec 1892, p.376.

¹⁹ ‘Electric Light and the Metal Crafts’, *Art Journal*, October 1904, pp.321-328, pp. 321-2.

²⁰ Abigail Harrison Moore & Graeme Gooday, ‘Decorative Electricity: Standen and the Aesthetics of New Lighting Technologies in the Nineteenth Century Home’, *Nineteenth-Century Contexts: An Interdisciplinary Journal*, 35:4 (2013): 363-383.

²¹ [Art Journal, ‘Electric Light and the Metal Crafts’, October 1904, pp.321-328, pp. 321-2] Insert reference to original Ruskin piece here – *Stones of Venice*.

²² Shelia Kirk and Rosemary J Curry, *Philip Webb in the North*, Teesside Polytechnic press, Teesside, 1984. See also Maureen Dillon, *A History and Survey of the lighting at Standen*, (unpublished manuscript, January 2010), p.1.

²³ On 26 June 1893, Webb went ‘To Hollybush, met Mr and Mrs Beale and Mr Robert Beale (electric engineer and settled various things)’ {Edit this in more smoothly!} Standen was built on the site of Hollybush, Standen and Stone farms, and in the accounts the house is still referred to as Hollybush Farm. In keeping with Webb’s doctrine of respecting the local vernacular, much of the original farmhouse and barns were drawn into his designs for the new house and his aesthetic repeatedly references the Sussex Weald. See Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House*,

(London: Yale University Press, 1979). This meeting is also recorded in Webb's unpublished notebooks, 1891-4, where he lists 'June 26 1893, 'Met Mr and Mrs Beale and the Electric Engineer, R Beale, arranged with them for wires and lights. Engineers foreman...to arrange with Hardy'.

²⁴ CR Ashbee, 'Suggestions for Electric Light Fittings. Art Journal, March 1895, p.91.

²⁵ A bill from the Company dated December 1894 to Beale in the Standen archive records, 'August 29, 1894: 1 table standard No 1079 with green shade, ditto No. 1132, wiring no 1132, case and packing 3 12 6'.

²⁶ See Ian Hammerton, (ed), W.A.S. Benson, Arts and Crafts Luminary and Pioneer of Modern Design, (Woodbridge, Suffolk: Antique Collectors Club, 2005).

²⁷ *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) (Amhurst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1998).

²⁸ The private sphere was just as important as the public sphere, and men required their wives to assist them in engaging in the public social, economic and political activity, that was focused on the activity of 'buying'. (Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (eds), *The Politics of Consumption; Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, (Oxford: Berg, 2001), p.14.) A number of authors have examined the role of the female middle-class consumer in the development of a modern commercial world, and particularly at this point in time, in the development of the department store. See, for example Mica Nava, 'Modernity's disavowal: women, the city and the department store', in M. Nava and A. O'Shea (eds), *Modern Times: Reflections on a Century of English Modernity*, (London: Routledge, 1996), p.46. See also Margot C. Finn, 'Scotch Drapers and the Politics of Modernity', in Martin Daunton and Matthew Hilton (eds), *The Politics of Consumption; Material Culture and Citizenship in Europe and America*, (Oxford: Berg, 2001), pp.89-107, E.D. Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women and the Making of London's West End*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

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- ²⁹ A.F. Church 'Benson's Lights, Portfolio, 1890, pp.19-20
- ³⁰ Maureen Dillon, A History and Survey of the lighting at Standen, (unpublished manuscript, January 2010), appendix 1 'WAS Benson Designer and Manufacturer'.
- ³¹ Dillon (2010), p.15.
- ³² no. 1139 and 1079, Dillon (2010), p.15. An invoice from December 1894 confirms that two of these lamps (corresponding to catalogue numbers. 1079 and 1132) were supplied to the Beales and cost £1.15s.
- ³³ Gordon Decorative Electricity, p.88.
- ³⁴ Dillon (2010), appendix 1.
- ³⁵ 'Domestic Lighting: The Work of WAS Benson and Co Ltd' (advertising supplement) in W. Shaw Sparrow, (ed), *The British Home of Today*, (London: Hodder and Stourton, 1904)
- ³⁶ Benson, 'The Embossing of Metals', *English Illustrated Magazine* (1899) October, p.45).
- ³⁷ Benson, 'William Morris and the Arts and Crafts', *Nat Rev* (1899-1900), p.268.
- ³⁸ R Jope-Slade, 'Art and Electricity' *Magazine of Art*, 1897, quoted in Shirley Bury 'A Craftsman who used the Machine', *Country Life*, CXXXVII no. 3550, March 18, 1965, pp.624-7.
- ³⁹ A.F. Church 'Bensons Lamps', Portfolio, (1890), p.21.
- ⁴⁰ Aymer Valance 'The Furnishing and Decoration of the House, VI Window Blinds, Lighting and Accessories', *Art Journal*, Dec 1892, p.374.
- ⁴¹ Shirley Bury 'A Craftsman who used the Machine' *Country Life*, CXXXVII no. 3550, March 18, 1965, pp.624-7.
- ⁴² An invoice from the Company detailing the costs of these and other shades exists dated Aug 9, 1894 from Whitefriars glass works to JS Beale for in total £20 6 8half d.) (Dillon, 2010, pp.12-14).

⁴³ This can be compared to the chapter on 'Fire Risks' in Mrs Gordon's book that had been written by her electrical engineer spouse, James E.H. Gordon

⁴⁴ Country Life, CXXXVII no. 3550, March 18, 1965, pp.624-7.

⁴⁵ Bury, Country Life, CXXXVII no. 3550, March 18, 1965, p.627.

⁴⁶ Elements of Handicraft and Design (1893), (p.627).

⁴⁷ Art Journal, 'Electric Light and the Metal Crafts', October 1904, pp.321-328, p.322

⁴⁸ Anon, 'Obituary - Mr W.A.S.Benson', The Times, 9th July 1924.

⁴⁹ J Meier-Graefe, 'Moderne Beleuchtungskorper', Dek. Kunst, 1898, Heft 1. pp.3-20, translated by M Dillon.

⁵⁰ Hermann Muthesius, The English House Granada, 1979, p.199 (trans by Janet Seligman)